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Nutrition News: Chances are, your kids have way too much 'screen time'

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Nutrition News

When it comes to screen time in United States, the trends and effects are unfortunately clear.

American children spend more and more time in front of screens (TV, DVD, video games and computers). Current estimates of kids' screen time far exceed the recommendations of health experts.

The amount of screen time "enjoyed" by Generation M (for media) has a seriously negative effect on children's nutrition, fitness, overall health and academic performance. Although the relationships are less clear, excessive screen time may also affect young people's behavior and views of violence as well.

Here are a few examples of recent research compared to the relevant recommendations:

Generation M: Kaiser Family Foundation Report (March 2005)

- The total amount of media content youth are exposed to each day has increased by more than an hour for the past five years to 8.5 hours per day, with the increase largely coming from video games and non-school computer use.
- Children's bedrooms have become multi-media centers; two-thirds of 8- to 18-year-olds have a TV in their room, and half have a video game player. Those with a TV in their room spend almost 1.5 more hours watching TV each day than those without.

- Outside of bedrooms, the TV is a constant companion: nearly two-thirds of youth say the TV is "usually" on during meals, and half say they live in homes where the TV is left on "most" or "all" of the time. About half of all 8- to 18-year-olds say their families have no rules about TV watching.

Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine (April 2006)

- For each hour in front of the TV, children consumed an average of 167 extra calories, according to researchers from Harvard University. All the extra calories came from foods advertised most often on TV: snack cakes and cookies, chips, candy, soda pop, French fries and other fast food.

Food for Thought: Kaiser Family Foundation Report (March 2007)

- Tweens ages 8-12 see the most food ads on TV, an average of 21 ads a day, or more than 7,600 a year. Teens see about 17 a day, for a total of more than 6,000 a year.
- Of food ads that target children or teens, 34 percent are for candy and snacks, 28 percent are for cereal and 10 percent are for fast foods. Four percent are for dairy products and 1 percent for fruit juices. Of the 8,854 ads reviewed in the study, there were none for fruits or vegetables.

Journal of the American Dietetic Association (April 2007)

- Positive effects of family dinners are undone by television viewing: Low-income families with preschool children tended to eat better when dining together as a family, but less nutritiously when the television is on during dinner, according to researchers from the New York State Department of Health.

American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) Recommendations

- AAP suggests no television or video viewing for kids under 2. (Average daily time American children under 2 spend in front of a screen is just over two hours.)
- For children over 2, the recommendation is that they watch TV no more than two hours a day. (Current estimates are around three hours per day for this age group.)

Reducing screen time

Cutting back on screen time is one of the smartest moves a family can make. Here are five ways to make it easier than you imagined:

1. Make the commitment.

Spend time talking with your entire family about the benefits of reducing the amount of screen time for everyone. Emphasize the positives, and focus on the fact that these changes will give you more time to spend doing fun and creative things together. Some families find it helpful to sign a "pledge" together.

2. Have a plan and stick to it.

Identify how much time you currently spend with screen entertainment. Decide how to gradually reduce the total amount of screen time. Taking TV out of a child's bedroom is a very helpful step. Some families set a specific number of hours per day; others designate specific times (like 4 to 6 p.m.) as screen-free.

3. Treasure your time together.

The really good news about screen-free time is that it gives families more opportunities to really be together. It gives you more time to talk, more time to dream, more time to be physically active, more time to read, more time to share values and more time to enjoy each other's company.

4. Be patient.

Reducing the amount of time your family spends plugged into screens is a major change. It is often helpful to make this significant a change in small steps rather than giant leaps. In fact, many children will hardly notice if you gradually decrease their TV or video game time in 15-minute increments.

5. Be creative.

The theme for TV-Turnoff Week - April 23-29 - is "Imagine the Possibilities."

Use family time to brainstorm creative ways to spend screen-free hours. For more ideas, go to www.tvturnoff.org (also an excellent source for research on screen time.)

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